

## New program designed to curb underage drinking, driving

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by Briana Webster

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A new program has been created in an effort to deter Walker County's youth from making destructive decisions.

Tina Aaron is the coordinator for the Walker County's Community in Action coalition that works in conjunction with the Children's Policy Council. The results from a recent statistical survey were released showing the top 20 counties in the state that are at risk for underage drinking and driving and other related issues.

"We received a new grant from the state department of mental health to reduce underage drinking through prevention," Aaron said. "We have three goals — to reduce underage drinking and driving, to reduce those who would ride with someone who is driving who had been drinking and to reduce binge drinking, which they classify as having five or more drinks at a time."

The grant was received through Southern Prevention Associates in Clanton. Currently, there are approximately 15 to 20 people who serve on the subcommittee from various communities within the county; however, Aaron says they are still in need of a pastor/youth pastor, a Hispanic representative, a business owner that sells alcohol out of his or her establishment and a parent that is genuinely concerned about a child's well-being.

"We don't just need all professionals; we need other people that are just community-minded, because this is going to be something obviously that affects me, and it affects you. If we're on the road, we're all affected by drunk drivers or people that aren't even drunk but that's been drinking and driving," Aaron said. "Our goal is that if we can reduce the underage through prevention, we're hoping it will also spill over into any age."

There are many risk and protective factors associated with underage drinking. Risk factors may include availability of drugs and extreme economic deprivation within communities, family history, academic failure and lack of commitment in school, and/or peer and individual behaviors. Protective factors may consist of parental support and bonding, participating in social activities, healthy beliefs and clear standards, etc.

"I've talked to a lot of kids and one of the biggest things they've all said, or the majority of them have said, is that what influences them not to drink is if it's strongly discouraged at home," Aaron said. "... That was the main thing, the kids saying they wouldn't do it because of their parents. So, we know if there is a lack of that in the home — a lack of parents and a lack of supervision — that's a risk factor right there."

At the moment Aaron said they are still in the data-gathering phase of the four-year

grant where she is collecting information from law enforcement agencies, schools, municipalities, etc., to compare the findings from now to those at the end of the four-year span.

The main goal is to see a reduction in the number of drinking and driving among young people.

According to their website, Southern Prevention Associates “is a company specializing in substance abuse prevention services in Greene, Marengo, Sumter, Tuscaloosa and Walker counties. It is funded through the Alabama Department of Mental Health and supports the development of community coalitions to collaboratively address underage drinking.” Aaron said the majority of residents in Walker County acknowledge the fact that there is a drug and alcohol problem, especially now since the county is ranked No. 16 in the state with underage alcohol-related cases.

“This is important to me because I have teenagers myself, and [I’m trying to] teach them to make good decisions,” Aaron said. “... So, having children of my own and the fact that I’m on the roads every day, like everybody else is, and my children are driving. You never know who you are passing that has been drinking.”

If you would like more information or are interested in joining the subcommittee, you may email Aaron at [tinaaaron1@aol.com](mailto:tinaaaron1@aol.com).

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